

Environmental Fact Sheet



March 2001

EPA Wants Public Input on Draft Wastewater Discharge Permits for Lucky Friday, Coeur and Galena Mines

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is now accepting comments on two draft National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits for mining facilities in the Coeur d'Alene River Basin. One permit is for the Lucky Friday Mine near Mullan, Idaho, owned by Hecla Mining Company. The other permit is for the Coeur and Galena Mines and Mills near Wallace, Idaho, owned by Coeur Silver Valley, Inc. NPDES permits are required under the Clean Water Act for all point sources discharging pollutants into waters of the United States. These permits update the facilities' existing wastewater permits.

Written comments will be accepted on the permits until May 14, 2001. A public hearing will be held on May 8, 2001, for the purpose of accepting oral comments on the permits. More details are included in the box on the right.

Updated Permits Needed

Updating the Lucky Friday and Coeur and Galena Mine permits is part of continuing efforts to reduce the amount of metals in the rivers and streams in the Silver Valley and to protect fish and other aquatic life throughout the Coeur d'Alene Basin. The draft permits set conditions on the discharge of pollutants from each mine and place limits on the types and amounts of pollutants that can be discharged.

These will be the first discharge permits issued incorporating the Coeur d'Alene Basin Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) conditions issued last year by EPA and the State of Idaho. The TMDL established the "pollution budget" for metals (specifically cadmium, lead and zinc) for all sources that discharge to surface waters of the Coeur d'Alene Basin. Three mines and three municipal sewer systems in the Basin are scheduled to receive updated NPDES permits in order to comply with the TMDL.

The draft permits for the Mullan, Smelterville and Page municipal wastewater plants are expected to go out for public comment late this spring or early this summer.

You Can Comment on the Draft Permits

EPA will consider all comments before issuing the final permits. Written comments should be submitted by May 14, 2001. Comments should be addressed to: Office of Water Director at U.S. EPA, Region 10, 1200 Sixth Avenue, OW-130, Seattle, WA 98101.

In addition, EPA has prescheduled a public hearing on May 8, 2001, beginning at 6:00 p.m. at Silver Hills Middle School in Osburn, Idaho. A sign-in process will be used for people wishing to make a statement or submit written comments at the hearing.

EPA Acknowledges Economic Impacts

EPA recognizes that the mines in the Silver Valley are facing tough economic times. It is likely that in order to comply with the updated permits, the companies will need to make investments to upgrade their wastewater management operations. EPA believes that it is technically and economically feasible for the mines to meet the limits set in the draft permits.

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Other mines in the Northwest and Alaska are operating under up-to-date permits and have made changes in the processes to reduce pollution to meet current standards.

What Do the Draft Permits Require?

The draft permits require the mines to reduce the amount of metals and other pollutants discharged from their facilities. The permits set limits for metals, total suspended solids and the pH (a measure of acidity) of the wastewater. Under the permits, the Lucky Friday facility could reduce the total amount of metals they currently discharge by nearly 3,000 pounds per year and, together, the Coeur and Galena facilities could reduce their current discharge of metals by approximately 2,000 pounds per year.

Other provisions of the permits include:

- The permits allow the mines to vary the amounts of pollutants discharged based on river conditions. For example, when the river flow is high, the mines will be allowed to discharge more wastewater than during lower flow periods. During low-flow periods, the mines may choose to store some wastewater in order to meet the limits.
- The permits also allow for a 25 percent by volume "mixing zone." This means that 25 percent of the river or stream flow is allowed for dilution of the wastewater. This allows larger amounts of wastewater and higher concentrations of pollutants to be discharged than would otherwise be allowed without a mixing zone or with a smaller mixing zone.
- The final permits will also likely give the mines some time to comply with some of the permit limits. The draft permits do not indicate how long the mines will have to comply, but the final permits will likely provide a "compliance schedule" for each facility, as determined by the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

- The permits require that the mines monitor the streams they are discharging the wastewater into. The monitoring requirements also include quarterly testing to evaluate possible combined toxic effects on aquatic organisms. The mines will also be required to conduct studies of their treatment ponds to determine if the wastewater is seeping from the ponds to the nearby streams.

The permits will each be issued for a five-year period. The Lucky Friday permit was last reissued in 1977 and expired in 1980. The Coeur and Galena permits were last reissued in 1989 and expired in 1994.

Hecla recently requested a variance from water quality standards for lead and zinc. This request is now being reviewed by the state and EPA. If a variance is granted after the permit is issued, the permit will be modified.

What Will the Mines Have to Do to Comply With the Permits?

NPDES permits allow each mine to design their own way to meet discharge limits. In other cases, mines typically recycle or reuse their process water rather than discharging it; they may chemically treat the wastewater before discharging it; and they may store wastewater during low flow periods, when the discharges would be more damaging to the river. The Silver Valley mines may need to take similar actions to comply with their permits.

What's An NPDES Permit?

The Clean Water Act requires NPDES permits for all "point sources." By definition, point sources are discrete conveyances such as pipes or man made ditches. Facilities must obtain permits if their wastewater discharges directly to surface waters. Some pollutants in wastewater may threaten public health and the nation's waters. These include: human wastes, toxic chemicals, oil and grease, metals and pesticides.

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What's the State's Role?

As part of the NPDES process (section 401 of the Clean Water Act), the state must certify the permit before it is issued. This means that the state agrees that the permit complies with its water quality standards. The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ) submitted comments that have been incorporated in the draft permits.

You Can Also Comment on State Certification Decisions

You can review and provide input on IDEQ's comments on the draft permits by contacting the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, Coeur d'Alene Regional Office, c/o David Stasney, 2110 Ironwood Parkway, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho 83814. Public comments must be submitted by May 14, 2001.

After the public comment period, EPA will prepare a response to public comments, make appropriate modifications, and submit the proposed final permits to the state for its final certification.

Where to Review the Permits

The draft NPDES permits and fact sheets can be reviewed at the following locations:

EPA Field Office
1910 NW Boulevard
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho 83814

Idaho Dept. of Environ. Quality
Coeur d'Alene Regional Office
2110 Ironwood Parkway
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, 83814
(208) 769-1422

Wallace Public Library
415 River Street
Wallace, Idaho
(208) 752-4571

U.S. Environmental Protection
Agency, Region 10
1200 Sixth Avenue, OW-130
Seattle, Washington 98101
(206) 553-0523 or 1-800-424-4372

The draft permits and fact sheets can also be found on EPA's Region 10 website at:
www.epa.gov/r10earth/water.htm.

Who Can You Call?

For information about the Lucky Friday draft permit, contact **Ben Cope**, at 206-553-1442.

For information about the Coeur and Galena draft permit, contact **Kelly Huynh**, at 206-553-8414.



United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

Region 10 (ECO-081)
1200 Sixth Avenue
Seattle WA 98101